

# Yes, You Can

Surviving a Loss to Suicide

**Linda Fehrman**

# Quote

- *“The suffering of the suicidal is private and inexpressible, leaving family members, friends and colleagues to deal with an almost unfathomable kind of loss, as well as guilt. Suicide carries in its aftermath a level of confusion and devastation that is, for the most part, beyond description.”*

- Kay Redfield Jamison

# Suicide Bereavement

- Is bereavement after suicide different from other bereavement?
- In many important ways, grief after a suicide resembles grief after other kinds of death, particularly when that death was sudden, violent, or traumatic.
- Although, there doesn't appear to be some kind of "survivor syndrome," suicide loss does have several distinct **themes**, which are extremely common among survivors.

# Why?

- Survivors struggle to try to make sense of what happened—putting the pieces together again and again, recreating their loved one's last days or weeks, and asking themselves:
  - how could this have happened?
  - what signs did I miss?
  - how could he have hidden this?
  - how could she have done this (to me)?

# Why?

- Often survivors feel blindsided by the suicide, and feel they “didn’t see it coming.”
- Suicide can shatter a survivor’s fundamental beliefs about how the world is supposed to work, their expectations about the predictability and fairness of life, and their “scripts” about how life should go.
- For some, the questions persist, perhaps ebbing and flowing for a very long time.

# Guilt and Responsibility

- There is a strong tendency among survivors to wonder whether the suicide is somehow their fault and to blame themselves for things they said (or didn't say) or did (or didn't do).
- Almost all survivors struggle with whether the suicide could have been prevented.
- This in turn can cause intense feelings of guilt.
- Or, they may “try on” different theories of who is responsible (the doctor, school or therapist), only to return to themselves.

# Shock and Numbness

- Another response to the death may be shock and numbness
- Survivors also frequently experience difficulty sleeping, excessive irritability, trouble concentrating, and other symptoms
- Some survivors (esp. those who found the body) may have a more extreme reaction, reliving the traumatic experience through intrusive and highly distressing memories and nightmares. They may also live in intense fear of some other traumatic event happening.

# Shame

- Although it's beginning to change, there is still a great deal of ignorance and fear about suicide.
- The resulting stigma can be pervasive, and many survivors feel it. They may feel ostracized and shut out by people who are unsure about what to do or say, and therefore don't provide as much emotional support as the survivor craves.
- Sometimes, families hide the cause of death from other family members and the community.
- A legacy of shame and secrecy surrounding the suicide can add greatly to survivors' pain.



# Rejection, Abandonment, and Anger

- Some survivors may feel profoundly rejected or even punished by their loved one.
- Some may feel that they've been abandoned and left to deal with the emotional fallout.
- "Didn't he think of me."
- These feelings of abandonment can in turn lead to strong feelings of anger at the deceased for causing so much pain.

# Effect on the Family

- Suicide can cause conflict within a family, resulting in blaming, tension over different grieving styles, fear that other family members may now be at risk, and disagreements over whether to tell the truth about the suicide, particularly as it relates to the children.

# Relief

- Sometimes survivors may experience relief, especially when the suicide was the culmination of a long, downward spiral that included psychiatric illness, disruption to the family, and sometimes even previous suicide attempts.
- Relief can be a difficult emotion for some survivors to share, since they may feel guilty about it—but it is nonetheless a common and understandable feature of the survivor experience.

# Depression and Suicidality

- Survivors may experience symptoms of depression themselves, including disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, intense sadness, and lack of energy.
- They may even find themselves struggling with their own feelings of suicidality, and/or fears that another loved one may now be at risk.

# Sorrow

- Suicide survivors also experience the common reactions that accompany mourning after any other type of death, including sadness and sorrow, a deep yearning to have the person back, and confusion about how to go on living life without their loved one.
- All grief involves feelings of loss, and all loss requires learning how to live in a permanently changed world, where love and memory must replace physical presence.

# Coping Mechanisms

Some suggested coping mechanisms include:

- Talking with family and friends
- Joining a support group
- Journaling, reading
- Exercise
- Volunteering
- Some people find comfort in their faith

Just remember that what may be helpful for one person, may not be helpful for you.

# DO

- Steer clear of people who want to tell you what or how to feel.
- Learn to say “NO.” Don’t set yourself up by agreeing to something you are not ready for.
- Learn to ask for help when you need it.
- Be patient with yourself. Go at your own pace.
- Remember to take it one day at a time or even one moment at a time.
- Know that you need to talk.
- Know that you are vulnerable to developing addictions at this time (alcohol, drugs, gambling).

# Don't

- Isolate yourself. You may want to—but don't.
- Be surprised when after a couple of weeks or a month the calls stop or people don't come by. Others move on, even if you can't.
- Be surprised if you don't have the energy to buy groceries or do laundry. It's common.
- Be disappointed if just when you think you have things under control a wave of grief comes back.



# **The Journey Through Grief**

The Mourner's Six Reconciliation  
Needs

Dr. Alan Wolfelt

# Acknowledge the Reality of the Death

- This first need involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life.
- Acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months.
- Talking it out—replaying is a vital part of this need. (Support Group)
- Ask “why?” over and over again until “why” no longer matters.

# Embracing the Pain of the Loss

- It might seem easier to avoid, repress or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it.
- May need to “dose” yourself in embracing your pain. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

# **Remember the Person Who Died**

- Need to create a relationship of memory.
- Photos, memories, dreams, souvenirs all give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship.
- You must allow and encourage yourself to pursue this relationship.
- Remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible.

# Developing a New Self-Identity

- When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.
- Go from “parent” to “bereaved parent.”
- The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

# Searching for Meaning

- When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life.
- You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask “How?” and “Why?” questions.
- The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.
- You are faced with finding some meaning in going on with your life even though you may often feel so empty.

# **Receiving Ongoing Support from Others**

- The quality and quantity of understanding support you get will have a major influence on your capacity to heal.
- You cannot - nor should you try to - do this alone.
- Because mourning is a process that takes place over time, a support system must be available months and even years after the death.

# Reconciling Your Grief

- Know that your grief journey will never end. You do not “get over” grief.
- Reconciliation occurs as you work to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died.
- Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that your life can and will move forward.



# Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Family History:** If a family member completes suicide, there is an increased risk that someone else in the family will also.
- **Neurobiology:** Low levels of serotonin may be associated with suicide and with violent suicide attempts.
- **Alcohol and other Substance Use and Abuse:** Associated with approximately 25-50% of suicides, especially when combined with mood disorders.

# Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Past Suicide Attempts:** Previous suicide attempts especially those requiring life-saving intervention are a strong risk factor.
- **Overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness.**
- **Stressful life event:** A severe, stressful event experienced as shameful or humiliating, such as a failure (real or imagined) in school or work, an arrest, or a rejection by a loved one. Physical and sexual abuse are also important sources of stress.

# Risk Factors for Suicide

- **Existing Psychological Disorders:** More than 90% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosable (although not necessarily diagnosed) psychiatric illness at the time of their death (most often depression, bipolar disorder, or substance abuse, or a combination). As many as 75% of adolescent suicides are associated with an existing mood disorder such as depression. **Just as people can die of heart disease or cancer, people can die as a consequence of these underlying illnesses.**